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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Walter Swank Jr., age 40, Council Bluffs, Iowa
Mike Hicklin
Iowa Department for the Blind; Des Moines, Iowa
10-2-2011**

Mike Hicklin: This is Mike Hicklin doing the recording...Walter Swank Jr. is the gentleman being interviewed. This recording is taking place at the Iowa Department for the Blind building in Des Moines, Iowa. The

date is October 2, 2010 and it's approximately 2:41 pm. This is...need to read a quick little thing here that explains the information that you need. It says: All stories submitted to this project will become part of a History of Blindness collection owned by the Iowa Department for the Blind. By submitting your story you are acknowledging that your story is a gift, which transfers to the Iowa Department for the Blind all legal title and all literary property rights. You will be granting the Iowa Department for the Blind an unrestricted license to use your recording and all the information which it contains in any manner that the Department for the Blind may wish to use it, for as long as the Iowa Department for the Blind wishes to use it. Do you agree to have your story recorded?

Walter Swank: Sure.

Hicklin: Okay, that's a yes?

Swank: Yeah.

Hicklin: Okay, JR, would you please tell us your full name, age and where you live.

Swank: I'm Walter Swank Jr. I'm 40-years-old. I'm originally from Council Bluffs. I've been living here in Des Moines for about eleven years. I currently work at DMRG or Des Moines Radio Group down here on Locust; Western edge of down town. I work specifically with KRNT in AM 9.40 running ball games and stuff.

Hicklin: That should be pretty interesting exciting work.

Swank: Oh, yeah it's pretty...I've been doing that for three and a half years now.

Hicklin: What story would you like to share with us?

Swank: Well, I guess it would be the story that I was thinking, was my time at Vinton; although there's so many. I went to the Iowa Braille school basically from K to twelve. So, there's quite a bit of material there.

I guess, in the story that I could think of was the time that a friend of mine and I were playing in one of the fire escapes, hatches or shoots, you know, in one of the buildings, the cottage, which was in '82. Well we didn't see any harm in it, you know, just goofing around, you know. And, it was a building that really wasn't getting used that much by then either. So, like I said, we didn't really see any harm in it. So, we're playing around and we'd climb up it and we'd slide back down. Well, the superintendant at the time caught us. (Laughter) We didn't get in too much trouble. He just said, "I wish you wouldn't..." And, then like...

Hicklin: Were you in the stair well or were you sliding down the roof or was...?

Swank: This was a, one of those fire escape hatches, or whatever you call them. Apparently, what it is you slide down this shoot.

Hicklin: Yes. Sounds like fun!

Swank: Oh, well, yeah. I mean, it was just like I said we didn't really see any harm in it. Plus, it was a building that really never...or that at that point was barely getting used.

5:00

Swank: Except for, I think, day care was in there. But, yeah, we would do that and we got caught. We didn't really get in too much trouble for it he just told us that we shouldn't do that because if there was really a fire in the place that...And then, like, a couple, I think a week or two later, kind of did it sanctioned. In other words, we went up into the building and did it the right way instead of climbing up it and sliding down it. So, yeah, that's...

Hicklin: Was that a regular fire drill then?

Swank: Well, I think he was going to treat it as one but we didn't use the fire alarm.

Hicklin: Well, by then you knew what to do. (Laughter)

Swank: Well, yeah. I mean...And, when I started there in '74, that's where I started anyway, was the cottage building which is where a lot of the little kids were.

Hicklin: Is that a residential unit or is that where you...

Swank: That was one of the residential units on campus.

Hicklin: So, you actually lived there. Was it like multi-story?

Swank: There was two. The upper floor was for the dormitories. The lower floor had the class rooms on either end. One end was for the, what would you say, first year, whatever was below Kindergarten. And, then the other side, I think, was kindergarten because they had different teachers. And, in between, I think there was a stair well and a couple rest rooms and other little rooms there.

Hicklin: How many folks would live in the dorm area in the upper floor? Was it about ten or twelve people, or twenty, or just a few?

Swank: Now, in there, in the cottage, it kind of was split because one end would be the boys and the other end would be the girls. There was only like a handful of us.

Hicklin: Were you all about the same age?

Swank: Oh yeah, about four or five. What was weird was we had one of those, what you call it, those old Winnebagos that you could sit on top of, and we would ride from one end to the other. We did things like that or we'd ride down to the...There was a bathroom right there kind of in between the two, probably more on our side than theirs.

And, then we had like two different type of rooms as far as like sleeping quarters. One year we had this smaller room...They had this smaller room, but it was enough to have like about five, six, seven of us in one room. And, in the play room was this big...which just happens to be where that fire escape was. And, then the next year that I was there my second year, they put the bedroom...The first year

they had the bedroom and the big room, I can't remember which way it went, but that's how they did that.

And, then I went to Rice Hall which was named after, actually one of the teachers there named Rice. I think her name was Loretta. But, that's when you get into like the older, like your seven and eight, nine, ten year-olds. You know six through about, well, six through twenty-one.

10:00

Swank: Kind of what you had in that building, because you had three...Well, it started out we had three different areas. Now, when I started over in that particular building they had kind of, went by, called areas one two and three. I was in area three. And, then there was a little place below us called the Honor Dorm and that's where, like, the...some of like the seniors were.

And, then after a while they started splitting it into East and West. So, you had area two East, which is where I started, was; and then area two West was like the old, like the older kids were. And, then there was a one West which is the lower level, or well, the middle level I should say. And, that's where I think they had some of the seniors. And, then one East, that became the Cottage in time, where all the kids that used to be in that old Cottage building.

Hicklin: What was it like trying to...When it got to be bedtime; if there were five or six of you in the same bedroom, what was it like trying to get to sleep with a bunch of your buddies right there with you?

Swank: Well, you had your people who would get to talking, you know, when they're supposed to be sleeping that happened.

Hicklin: So, were there dorm parents who would come?

Swank: Yes, they do have...They had house parents.

Hicklin: Come tell you to go to bed.

Swank: Yes. A house parent and house parent aid, and then they had a night house parent overnight. When I got a little older then I ended up in area one West, which was in like the middle, older like twelve, or like eleven, and about probably fifteen or sixteen; I'm not sure. Some of them were older; I don't remember. The funny thing was they kind of changed things on us all the time every year, so you never knew where you were. Because one year I was...They kind of put us all together. They put us and the littler kids in one dorm one year.

Hicklin: Did you get to come home for the summers?

Swank: Yes. That was one of the few times when they did not bus. You see, we bussed home. They had a fleet of busses. One would go...for the four corners the South East, North East, North West, and South West. I was the South West and I had a long, well...

Hicklin: Had a long bus ride.

Swank: Well, there was one student that had actually as long even longer than I did, and then she left and I was the longest.

Hicklin: How long would it take to get home, several hours?

Swank: Well, yeah about, I would say about six or seven hours; which, normally, would be like a four hour, three, four hour trip. But, you know, we had to drop people off at their, you know...You had people in Des Moines you had to drop off, and places along the way.

Hicklin: Were they regular school type busses, or were they more like RVs?

Swank: They were school busses. And, then one year they got a bus that had a wheelchair, because we started getting a lot of wheelchair, people in wheelchairs. So, we ended up we had, like, two wheelchair busses, or busses with wheelchair lifts. Of course, in the later years they started taking the, for whatever reason, making the trips like every week. I don't know if that was the whole budget thing you know. I don't know; it was kind of part of the, what led to the downfall of the school. A lot of us alumni don't like what's happened; but what are you going to do?

Hicklin: Well, in telling the stories and being aware of what's happening to the school, and making your thoughts known, is probably what you can do; lot of history.

Swank: Yeah. That's where Mary Ingalls went and some people say she still haunts the place. (Laughter)

Hicklin: I guess...who was she?

Swank: Mary Ingalls; Little House.

Hicklin: Oh, okay.

Swank: Yeah, she apparently went to the school back in the, it was from 1881 to 1889, I believe.

Hicklin: She certainly wrote some nice stories.

Swank: You're thinking of Laura Ingalls.

Hicklin: That I am. So, who was Mary Ingalls then?

Swank: That was her sister. She was the one that went blind and ended up at the school.

Hicklin: Anything else you'd like to share?

Swank: Well, no. I think that's it.

Hicklin: Well, thank you very much, JR. And we'll get this submitted as part of the collection, and thank you, again.

17:39

(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz

6-29-2011